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BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

COMPLETED

U.S. Consular Services To Innocents--And Others--Abroad: A Good Job Could Be Better With A Few Changes

ORIGINAL

Every year some 1.8 million Americans in foreign countries seek help from U.S. consulates. To enhance the ability of consular officers to respond, the Government should: increase the authority and resources of the Foreign Service to help Americans in emergencies; reduce the consular workload by waiving visa requirements for selected countries; establish a number of positions for the consular function more nearly commensurate with the workload; update and extend U.S. consular conventions; and take affirmative action against perceived inequities between the consular and the other career "cones" of the Foreign Service.

SUMMARY

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

U.S. CONSULAR SERVICES TO INNOCENTS--AND OTHERS--ABROAD: A GOOD JOB COULD BE BETTER WITH A FEW CHANGES

D I G E S T

Every year some 1.8 million Americans abroad find themselves unexpectedly in need of help from the U.S. Government. If they become incapacitated, are arrested, go broke, need advice on a tax return, fail to receive a Social Security check, are robbed or expropriated, lose their passports, or disappear, they or their families are apt to turn first to the hard-pressed officers of the U.S. Foreign Service who handle consular affairs.

This report examines the current supply-demand equilibrium of U.S. consular services to American citizens abroad--the kinds and quality of services American travelers seek, the adequacy of the State Department's response, and the need for adjustments in either the citizen's expectations or the Government's ability to meet them, or both.

A substantial majority of the Americans who responded to GAO's queries about their experiences in the 13 countries covered in this review indicated satisfaction with the consular services they had sought. About a fourth indicated dissatisfaction. Many citizens' requests to or complaints about consular performance reveal a lack of understanding about what consulates can and cannot do in the prevailing legal or political circumstances. Other requests and complaints appear reasonable--and in many of those cases State could be doing better.

To improve the quality of consular services, the Government should give consular officers greater discretion in handling emergencies, develop procedures permitting a major reduction in the burden of issuing visas, and take steps to enhance the attractiveness of consular work.

HOW TO MAKE GOOD EMERGENCY SERVICES BETTER

In a variety of cases GAO reviewed--involving medical or legal emergencies, deaths, incompetency, or destitution--reasonable assistance to Americans abroad proved impossible because consular officers lacked authority to make small loans or take other steps and to do so on their own initiative. Consular officers should have a broader, defined discretion to cope with such emergencies.

Lack of clarity about the application of the Privacy Act of 1964 is further tying the hands of consular officers in their efforts to assist Americans in certain emergency situations abroad.

EASING THE VISA BURDEN

In addition to helping Americans abroad, consular officers issue close to 6 million visas a year to foreigners seeking to visit the United States. This function imposes a heavy and frequently unnecessary burden on the consular posts and entails an inefficient distribution of consular personnel worldwide. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 should be modified to permit blanket visa waivers for selected "low risk" countries. Amendments for that purpose are pending in the Congress.

CAREER CONE DISCRIMINATION IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE

Of the four career "cones" or basic specialties in the U.S. Foreign Service--political, economic-commercial, administrative, and consular--the consular cone alone has been persistently understaffed. In addition, the classification structure of the consular cone is not on a par with that of the other cones, which have traditionally enjoyed a disproportionate share of the higher-rated positions. These conditions adversely affect both morale and efficiency in the consular cone.

CLARIFICATION OF CONSULAR FUNCTIONS

The Secretary of State is seeking to work out with the Congress an agreed list and definition of services Americans may expect from consulates and to improve communication with the public on consular affairs. Such efforts can help clarify the consular function for the American public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State:

--Reassess and revise consular authority for emergency assistance to Americans abroad.

--Review and extend U.S. consular conventions.

--Take affirmative action to end widespread perceptions of "cone discrimination."

GAO recommends that the Attorney General:

--Determine, in cooperation with the Secretary of State, what if any new controls are necessary to an effective system of blanket visa waivers for selected countries.

AGENCY COMMENTS

A draft of this report was submitted for official comments to the State and Justice Departments. The State Department has not provided such comments. The Justice Department's official comments, concurring with the recommendation (in ch. 4) relevant to activities of that Department, appear in appendix III.

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ABBREVIATIONS

GAO	General Accounting Office
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service